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Semiosphere and Anthropological Aggression on the Example of the “Memorial Conflict” — Polish-Russian borderland: Warmia

Robert Borocho¹

¹ University of Warsaw

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Abstract

The analysis will concentrate on the “memorial conflict” currently taking place in the Polish–Russian border region of Warmia, Poland. The material presented in the article is the result of fieldwork in that region. Based on the findings, it was possible to make the following remarks in terms of anthropological aggression: (1) the inhabitants perceive the destruction of signs of local culture as an act of violence; (2) the apparent lack of semiotic links between national culture and local culture leads to social stratification, and (3) the local and the central administration policy goes against the cultural precepts of the residents and is perceived as a threat to the security of the population.

Robert Borocho

University of Warsaw

Introduction

Semiosphere is one of the terms used to describe the sociocultural terrain in which signals and sign systems networks work together. The term itself leans from Yuri Lotman's semiotics of culture and helps understand the human social environment denoted by the sign and sign systems. The semiotic aspects of such an environment represent three correlated scopes: (1) semiotics — refers to the structure of the sign and its material or non-material representation; (2) semantic — refers to the proposition content carried by sign or sign systems; and (3) pragmatics — refers to usage sign and sign systems by an intelligent agent for example in communicating abstract ideas. Considering Lotman's semiotic terminology, these three collapsible components — semiotics, semantics, and pragmatics — constitute what this scholar refers to as Semiosphere structural and functional elements. In addition, the sign system represents interconnected signs. From this combination, the logic of its connectivity can be deduced — what in Lotmanian terminology is called the system's grammar—and the system's essential elements, the smallest semiotic entities —called a lexicon.

Lotman's semiosphere proposal highlighted the mechanisms of semiotic influence on social structures, referred to as information influence, information warfare, or propaganda in the context of the social sciences. Unsurprisingly, the contemporary informational impact on society mainly occurs through sign systems as an information carrier. In Lotman's view, the semiosphere is a spontaneous formation, but it seems incorrect if we look at things from a modern perspective. According to research, using the natural properties of human nature to fill in the gaps in stories that describe reality tends to result in entirely inadequate narratives.

An intelligent agent can be utilised to guide the narrative creation process in an appropriate or ideologically motivated direction. Doing so gives individuals the impression of “independent thinking” and objectivity in assessing social phenomena that is apparent. Many basic cognitive processes are based on this mechanism. This mechanism develops individual judgments as “false independent decisions” based on thought processes. Although this is not true, the whole process is triggered in the first place by semiotic media. In the past, the aggressor developed narratives to prepare a hybrid strike against the local community using propaganda or long-term information shifting. The assailant needs to exploit this fundamental human semiotics sense. It is possible for agents, such as states, intelligence agencies, cultural institutions, religious associations, or ethnic-social associations, to influence the content of the semiosphere by introducing sign systems that represent a particular ideology or culture, for example, those that are carriers of a specific historical memory. To model the semiosphere in a particular ideological direction, new sign systems will be aggressively substituted for existing ones, which will explicitly carry a proposition promoting the vested interests of the attacker. As a result of such actions, a social group will be disintegrated, ethnic relations will be blown apart, historical and cultural ties will be broken, local officials' authority will be undermined, etc. Unfortunately, the statements above cannot be viewed as theoretical.

This article will examine the results of fieldwork conducted in 2018-2021 in Warmia, a cultural Polish-Russia borderland. Warmia covers an area of 4,250 km², constituting 17.6% of the area of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship — historic Warmia includes cities such as Olsztyn, Braniewo, Lidzbark Warmiński, Biskupiec, Dobrze Miasto, Orneta, Barczewo, Reszel, Jeziorany, Pieniężno, Bisztynek, and Frombork.

Anthropological aggression

It was in 1999 when Russian military anthropologists stormed the socio-cultural ground to use it as a battlefield for the culture war, which was intended as a preparation for armed conflict (Boroch, 2021) — this is unsurprising since the Russian military anthropology project united social psychology, sociology, history, ethnography, security studies, cultural studies, and narratology. As a result of such comprehensive socio-cultural and historical knowledge, cultural impact operations can be prepared with enhanced efficiency and accuracy. This phenomenon has been described as a hybrid threat that influences social decision-making processes. There was a quick application of this concept in the field — the term hybrid operation was changed here, as the hybrid strike was used.

Informational influence, disinformation, fake news, agents of influence, activities related to the right to culture involving the national or ethnic minority, etc., have been described as anthropological aggression (Boroch, 2021) — informational, ideological, or symbolic taking over of a community. This way, it is possible to model historical narratives and impact social groups' consciousness and self-consciousness. The fieldwork of Polish military anthropologists — Boroch and Korzeniowska-Bihun — has quickly shown that there is a counter to violent action — what has been called anthropological defence (Boroch, Korzeniowska-Bihun 2021).

The Russian Federation is believed to have been exerting a negative sociocultural influence on Ukraine since 2002. There is no doubt that in this kind of impact, one of the essential tools is using sign systems which create a suitable environment for implementing a particular political narrative in the following phases. As such, this results in constructing a “deconstructed semiosphere”, leading to a stigmatised semiosphere, one of the most potent factors influencing the public consciousness. As a result of this mechanism, the Russian Federation has been able to control the Ukrainian socio-culturally environment by constructing a semiosphere with solid ties to the Russian Federation's strategic policy.

Monuments and memorials: dissenting viewpoints

The process of cultural naturalisation is closely related to advancing social factors such as identity, moral values, attitude towards the state and its laws, sense of belonging to the nation, etc. A cultural naturalisation process may occur independently, or a state actor may initiate the process as has been known since ancient times. State actors could actively engage in naturalisation practices of the social environment. Modelling of semiotic slots — the semiosphere — has become a widespread technique in recent years — to describe this phenomenon; the term symbolic violence here is used. It is essential to understand that symbolic violence has a discreet character — the sign systems are altered, as a result of which the semiosphere is changed in a less detectable way. In that shifting process, memorials, monuments, war cemeteries, and commemorative plaques are all significant spoilers. Organising social practices around them can mark typical social behaviours that manifest specific values and beliefs in a particular community. Thus, this extends the information impact into the broader society within the country and beyond.

Such a phenomenon can be observed in the region of Warmia — a historical and ethnographic area north of Poland — the region is a part of the historical region called East Prussia. After the end of the Second World War, Warmia was entirely incorporated within the borders of the Polish state. Currently, Warmia is part of the Polish-Russian borderland.

It is worth noting that the Red Army captured East Prussia, including Warmia, due to the East Prussian Operation, which began in January 1945.

During 1945–1989, the Polish communist authorities developed a narrative that glorified the Red Army as part of the cultural naturalisation of the region. The construction of the commemoration of the heroes of the Red Army supported the process of cultural naturalisation through supremacy in the historical narrative: (1) Liberation — not conquest — is what the local population expects to happen; (2) Extending communist ideology, etc. However, the hidden narrative was the treatment of Warmia and Mazury as a war trope.

Ideas of conquest and unification of the lands belonging to Greater Russia appeared in Soviet propaganda of the 1930s. Such propaganda included the conquest of East Prussia, which may partly explain the use of only Soviet troops. In a propaganda film entitled *Иван Грозный* (Ivan the Terrible), directed by Сергей Михайлович Эйзенштейна (Sergei Eisenstein) from 1944–1945, during the coronation scene (part I), a question is raised concerning Russia's right to lands illegally taken from it — the 'Pribaltic' — the Baltic states.

"Strong power is needed to bend the spines of those who oppose the unity of the Russian state. Only with a united, strong, united kingdom on the inside can one be firm on the outside. However, what is our fatherland if not a body cut off at the elbows and knees? The upper reaches of our rivers — the Volga, the Dvina, the Volkhov — are under our control, but their access to the sea is in foreign hands. Our father's and grandfather's coastal lands have been torn away from our land. Therefore, on this day, we are crowned with possession of Russian lands under other sovereigns. Two Romans have fallen, but the third is Moscow. The third Rome, Moscow, I will be the sole master from now on, alone!"

It is important to note that the original text for the above passage was as follows:

"Нужна сильная власть, дабы гнуть хребты тем, кто единству державы Российской противится, ибо токмо при едином, сильном, слитном царстве внутри, твёрдым можно быть и во вне. Но что же наша отчизна, как не тело по локти и колени отрубленное. Верховья рек наших — Волги, Двины, Волхова под нашей державой, а выход к морю их в чужих руках. Приморские земли отцов и дедов наших от земли нашей отторгнуты. А посему, в день сей, венчаемся мы на владение теми Русскими землями, что ныне до времени под другими государями находятся. Два Рима пали, а третий Москва — стоит, и четвёртому Риму не быть! И тому Риму третьему, державе Московской единым хозяином отныне буду я, один!"

Roger Ebert, a prominent American critic, gave the film an outstanding rating in his review of the film published in 2012 (Ebert, 2012). In this case, it shows a misunderstanding of Russia's strategic culture, whose tangible manifestations are propaganda and aesthetically inferior works of cinema or literature.

When the Polish state regained its sovereignty in 1989, the question of the legacy of the Red Army re-entered the public discourse. As a result of that clash, there was a disagreement over the symbols — monuments, plaques, street names, war cemeteries etc. There may be some ease in changing street names, but obliterating material culture is a long-term task requiring much effort, primarily when it is used by the ruling elite for political struggle and by an external actor to prepare the foundations for future hybrid strikes.

Warmia is experiencing a problem of semiotic influence from both the Polish local authorities and other state actors. However, as heirs to the historic Great Patriotic War, the Russian Federation has a more robust dispute over historical memory than other state actors.

The creation of the following narratives by the Russian Federation in this regard is an excellent example of this. They depict the Polish side as having destroyed the memory of the Red Army soldiers, which indicates a resurgence of nationalism on the part of the Polish people.

Monuments of gratitude to the Red Army have been dismantled in Warmian towns such as Lidzbark Warmiński (February 2018), Reszel (in 2018), and a monument to Red Army general Ivan Danilovich Chernyakhovsky in Pieniężno (2015) — as a matter of fact, it should be noted that the Red Army's cemeteries have not been liquidated — the Red Army Memorial of Gratitude in Olsztyn whose demolition has been put on hold, remains contentious (see Photography 1). In local jargon, the monument is known as the gallows, which refers to the war crimes against both Polish and German civilians committed by the Red Army in this city.



Photography 1. "Monument to the Gratitude of the Soviet Army" — 'Olsztyn gallows' — 2020.

Source: Robert Boroch

Throughout the local population, memories of the war crimes committed by the Red Army are etched in the collective memory. Nevertheless, since Poland regained its sovereignty after 1989, residents are cultivating the memory of those murdered by the Russian troops. It is worth noting that on 22 January 1945, the 3rd Guards Cavalry Corps commanded by Nikolai Sergeevich Oslikovsky (Rus.Николай Сергеевич Осликовский) managed to capture most Olsztyn (Germ. Allenstein). The seizure of the city came almost without a fight. The destruction of the city's buildings, the slaying of the local population regardless of ethnicity, looting and mass rapes started instantly. Soviet soldiers murdered women, children, old people, the sick, wounded enemy soldiers, and their soldiers who were in German captivity.

The well-documented crimes of the 3rd Guards Cavalry Corps in Kortowo — a district of Olsztyn — have survived to the present day — around 600 people, including psychiatric hospital patients, were murdered. In years to come, the Polish communist authorities would attempt to cover up the war crimes committed by the Red Army against the Polish population of Warmia. It is worth adding that no one was punished for these crimes. Moreover, the Polish communists whitewashed history by obliterating all traces identifying Red Army soldiers.

Commemorating Polish communist fighters appears to be another highly controversial issue. According to a study, this issue is unlikely to exacerbate social stratification among residents due to deepening social alienation. In particular, the first generation of settlers who arrived after 1945 showed little emotional attachment to the region's history and culture.

For example, *Operation Vistula* —in 1947 was a policy adopted by the Polish authorities towards the Ukrainian population. *Operation Vistula* involved resettling approximately 140,000 civilians of Ukrainian (also Polish-Ukrainian families) to the so-called Regained Lands, which are Warmia and Mazury belongs. The official reasons for such actions concerned the

deprivation of logistical facilities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which was responsible for the ethnic cleansing of the Polish civilian population known as the *Massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia* in 1943. During the Ukrainian Insurgent Army's operations, over 100,000 Polish citizens are believed to have been killed. Consequently, it is not unexpected that such strained social relations continued between the two parties — even today (2023), these relationships are challenging to maintain.

By building a false narrative that Ukrainian and German nationalism is resurgent in the region, the Russian Federation is using historical legacies to sway society. Consequently, the construction of a narrative of resurgent Ukrainian, German and Polish nationalism, in general, is facilitated. From the Russian perspective, cultivating the historical and cultural traditions of the World War II period takes on a more profound significance. Therefore, the Russian Federation treats demolishing monuments dedicated to the Red Army as an attack on historical facts. The Russian historical policy entails the reinterpretation of historical facts in order to portray the Red Army in a more positive light. A contrary view is expressed by the indigenous inhabitants of Varmia who, having survived the 'Soviet liberation', are familiar with the reality of the matter.

Cultural Rivalry and Semiotic Transparency

There is a vast difference in the semiotic language used by Polish communists in the region. It should be noted that the nomenclature has been changed — 'fighter for Polishness', 'fighter for liberation', or 'fallen in the fight for mankind's most beautiful ideas', etc. Inscriptions of this type can be found on monuments, memorial plaques, and other memorials. As a result of a compromise reached between those who gave up power and those who took over after 1989, it has come into existence. However, historical figures have been grabbed, including social activists who were not affiliated with the Communist Party and were not party members. The purpose of such activities was to evoke community leaders' support for the authorities. There is no doubt that this simple method of manipulating historical facts has proven to be effective over the long term.

In order to demonstrate the importance of such measures, monuments that are not viewed negatively by the local community can be seen as examples of the effectiveness of such measures — Photography 2, 3 and 4.



Photography 2. Olsztyn — “To the heroes of struggles for national and social liberation of Warmia and Mazury” — 2020.

Source: Robert Borocho

Throughout the semiotic space, the ‘fighters of Warmia’s Polishness’ have been commemorated by monuments evocating their achievements — Polonisation (cultural naturalisation) of the Warmia.



Photography 3. Biskupiec: Monument on Plac Wolności — 2020.

Source: Robert Boroch

The monument bears the inscriptions: '1945 return of Warmia and Masuria to the Motherland' and 'To the Poles who fought for the Polishness of these lands. Above the eagle — a crown added in 1990 — there is a sign of the Rodło representing the Union of Poles in Germany since 1922. Rodło sign was also the badge of the Chemical Officers Training Centre soldiers in Biskupiec (Germ. *Bischofsburg*).



Photography 4. Olsztyn: War cemetery of Polish soldiers, Soviet Army and Free French airmen — 2021.

Source: Robert Boroch

The inscription on the memorial plaque reads: 'In this cemetery lie 4262 soldiers of the Soviet Army killed in the fight against the Nazi invaders during the victorious offensive in 1945 in the cities and districts of Olsztyn, Szczytno, Reszel, Jeziorany, Biskupiec, Nidzica, Dobrze Miasto, Barczewo. Their memory of them will be preserved forever among the inhabitants of this land as an enduring symbol of the brotherhood of nations in the struggle for the most beautiful ideas of mankind—socialism, freedom and peace.'

The importance of cultural participation and positive reinforcement in communal-group activities can influence semiotic transparency. The most significant is positive reinforcement in social acts, metaphorically referred to as *cultural participation*. By this, respondents mean days off due to mass marches, such as May Day parades involving funfairs, lake trips, etc.

At present, there is little or no interest in the history of social life in the past Polish People's Republic, and it will probably remain that way in the future.

Conclusion

The scope of the term monument warfare refers to the problem of disassembling Soviet World War II warfare memorials commonly erected by the communists — for example, monuments of gratitude to the Red Army, monuments to soviet commanders, or monuments commemorating significant soviet battles in that region. It must be made clear that the issue does not involve the Soviet war cemeteries of World War II.

In Warmia, chapels crosses, and memorials are a tradition maintained for centuries. Residents care for such artefacts naturally and spontaneously, as they are considered cultural heritage. It should be noted that this does not apply to monuments representing a particular political narrative, as they do not fall under this category. It is, therefore, not surprising that the political narrative has shifted to military cemeteries. An example is the war cemetery in Braniewo, which the Russians use as a symbolic demonstration of power by commemorating Victory in Europe Day — such actions maintain the public memory of the Great Patriotic War, which referred to the idea of patriotism of the nations that made up the USSR.

It has been documented that many countries, such as Belarus and Ukraine, are burdened by this tradition because of its political implications and the historical evidence that Red Army soldiers of Belorussian or Ukrainian nationality committed many war crimes during this period.

From a polling perspective, removing monuments commemorating Soviet commanders seems proper because their fellows perceive one nation's heroes differently. One example is the commemoration of General Ivan Chernyakhovsky (Rus. Иван Черняховский, Ukr. Іван Черняховський) in Pieniężno — he is personally responsible for the destruction of the structures of the Home Army in the Vilnius region of which the repercussions were The Augustów roundup. Chernyakhovsky patronises Ukraine's military higher education institution — The National Defence University of Ukraine (2023). However, it should be considered that a different approach is required when it comes to ordinary soldiers whose personal data is identified along with their area of activity or place of death. Many family members and relatives of the fallen attempt to find out what happened to them and where they have been buried. In many cases, Soviet propaganda kept relatives in the dark about the failure to take proper care of the burial — an example is Polikarp Polovinko (Rus. Поликарп Александрович Половинко) who had fallen on January 28, 1945, in the battle for the city of *Bischofsburg* (Pol. Biskupiec). The circumstances of his death have been well documented, as according to the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on June 26, 1945, Polovinko was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. His surviving son and relatives cherish the memory of Lieutenant P. Polovinko — on 22 June 2020, a memorial plaque was unveiled on the building of the Railway Transport Technical School in Batajsk, of which he was also a graduate in 1934. Relatives are still convinced that his grave is near *Bischofsburg* (Pol. Biskupiec) — field research has not confirmed this.

Other figures of those events are Ivan Kotov (Rus. Иван Котов), Sergei Mukin (Rus. Сергей Мукин), Ivan Yegorovich Rybinskiy (Rus. Иван Егорович Рыбинский) — all fallen on 29 January 1945 in Biskupiec or fallen near *Bischofsburg* (Pol. Biskupiec); also Nikolai Timofeyevich Bogdanov (Rus. Николай Тимофеевич Богданов) fallen near Najdymowo — his relatives, looking for information about the place of burial, contacted the author of this work by letter. The total losses in the Battle of *Bischofsburg*, according to Soviet archival sources, amounted to 191 name-identified Red Army soldiers, who were buried in the war cemetery in Olsztyn — this does not apply to the aforementioned.

If comrades-in-arms or residents had buried the fallen, there is no doubt that the crosses marking the graves on which they lie would not have been removed. It would violate local customs, as mentioned earlier.

The above example demonstrates not only the attitude of the Russian authorities towards their soldiers. However, it makes it possible to predict the scenario of a future hybrid operation in the region.

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